

# Sister act plays with a story of menace

## Duxbury pair just smile at similarity

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DUXBURY — Art imitates life as the Bay Players prepare “Arsenic and Old Lace” for four performances at Memorial Hall in Plymouth next weekend.

Real-life sisters Pat and Janet Peterson are playing the Brewsters, eccentric maiden aunts who slip arsenic into the elderberry wine they give forlorn male visitors to put them out of their misery.

While the Petersons do not add anything besides milk to a visitor's tea, served in a black Bay Players mug instead of formal Victorian china cups, they chuckle as they point out similarities between themselves and the Brewster sisters of the play.

“There are a lot of parallels,” said Pat Peterson, a professional singer who performs with the Ocean State Lyric Opera in Providence and has appeared in several Bay Players productions. Though her sister, a retired organic chemist, has acted in only one play for the Duxbury-based community theater, she has performed with choruses and a New York Gilbert and Sullivan group.

One of the biggest similarities is that the two pairs of sisters live together in the old family house.

The Petersons are Mayflower descendants (“Just like the Brewster sisters,” Pat said) who count John and Priscilla Alden and George Soule among their ancestors. Soule acquired the Duxbury property where their family home sits and where they spent their summer vacations as children. The property was developed by Reuben-Peterson,



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JUSTINE ELLEMENT

Pat (left) and Janet Peterson are helping to concoct “Arsenic and Old Lace” for the Bay Players in Plymouth next weekend. “There are a lot of parallels” between the play and real life, they say.

their ancestor, who came over from England in 1640. Their father was Reuben Peterson VII, or VI, depending on which sister is telling the family history.

“We also were born in Brooklyn [where the play takes place], and we always serve wine with dinner,” Pat Peterson said. The Brewster sisters “are supposed to be sweet and give

to charities. We like to support lots of environmental and wildlife groups.”

“And we’ve never been married, just like the Brewster sisters,” Pat added. “We always have clutter around, and we had Victorian aunts and grandparents and friends. We sort of think back to these people, and we have a sense of that era.”

Like the sisters in the play, the Duxbury sisters also have a soft spot for strays. They adopted their friendly black cocker spaniel, Brooksie, about seven years ago, after she was found wandering along Route 53 in Kingston. They named her after one of their grandmothers and decided to celebrate Brooksie's birth-

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# Sister act plays with a tale of eccentrics

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day on April 24, in honor of their mother's birthday.

There is an "Arsenic and Old Lace" tie with their black Burmese cat, as well.

"His name is Crofty, named after Mycroft, Sherlock Holmes's older brother," Pat Peterson said. "He is 12 years old."

"That's a very important number in the play," Janet added.

As soon as she finished her sentence, Pat chimed in: "There are 12 bodies in the cellar, and the villains [in the play] have killed 12."

Ever since they auditioned for the role of the Brewster sisters as a lark, Pat and Janet Peterson have been delighting in the parallels they continue to find between themselves and the play's central characters.

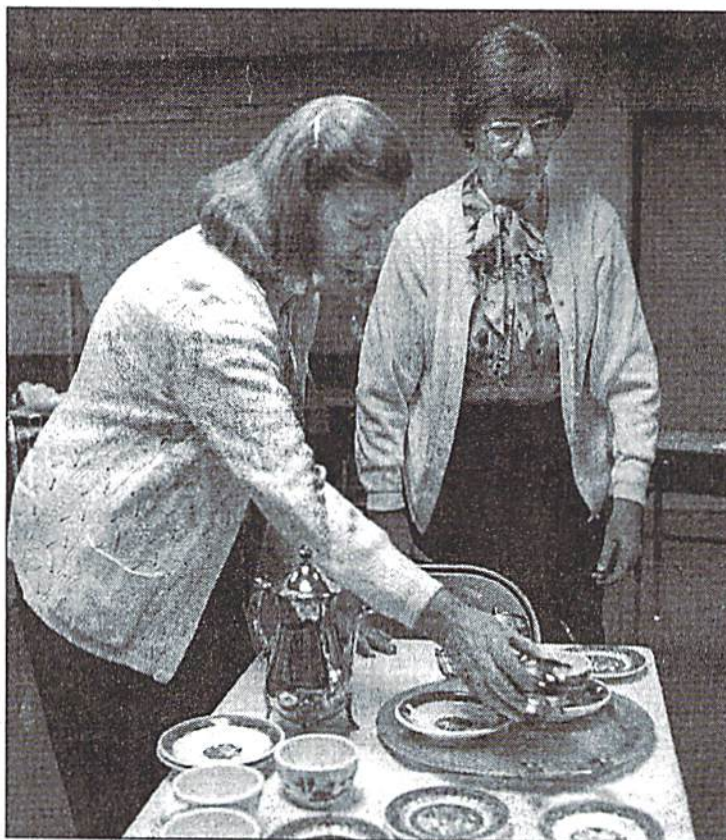
"I like to try new things, and I'm always making soup, just like the Brewsters," Pat Peterson said.

Like their fictional counterparts, Pat and Janet Peterson also love cooking up adventures together. On a typical summer day, the Peterson sisters can be seen digging for clams at low tide or canoeing around Duxbury Bay. Together they have traveled to Africa, the Galapagos Islands, Italy and Antarctica. They celebrated New Year's Eve at Disney World.

So far this year, the sisters agree that their biggest adventure is playing the two sisters in "Arsenic and Old Lace."

"We loved 'Arsenic and Old Lace' ever since we saw the movie with Cary Grant," Pat Peterson said. "We always thought it was hilarious. But we never thought we'd play the parts [of the sisters]."

The Peterson sisters are tall



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JUSTINE ELLEMENT

**Pat Peterson, left, and her sister, Janet, rehearse a scene from "Arsenic and Old Lace."**

(Janet at 5-10½, Pat at 5-9) athletic women who love tennis and other sports.

Janet, who turns 74 today, is the quieter one, interjecting gentle asides as her sister relates their histories. She has a doctorate in chemistry from the University of Illinois and worked as an organic chemist for Ciba-Geigy in New York until she retired eight years ago and moved back to Duxbury. An avid tennis player until she had hip replacement surgery two years ago, she is an alto in the chorus at First Baptist Church in Plymouth, where her sister is a soprano soloist.

Pat, the more theatrical one, studied music and philosophy at Mount Holyoke College and the University of Chicago and is one dissertation away from a doctorate in philosophy. Her singing experience includes performances in Chicago with various oratorio and opera companies, including synagogue choirs under the music direction of Max Janowski.

She allows that she is younger than her sister but wants to keep

her age under wraps, so it doesn't prejudice the professional roles she gets. Last year she appeared as Ruth in an abridged version of "The Pirates of Penzance" that the Ocean State Lyric Opera performed for Rhode Island elementary school students.

In addition to rehearsing with the rest of the cast at Duxbury Middle School, the Peterson sisters are practicing at home. Last week's task was to perfect the carrying of their silver tray with tea cups and saucers and setting the table at the same time they delivered their lines.

Hoping to give audiences entertaining and believable performances of the eccentric Brewster sisters, the sisters agree they are having a lot of fun in the play. "We'd like to take it on the road," Pat Peterson said.

Since a road show is unlikely, she said, she will audition for Ocean State's upcoming productions of "Ruddigore" and "The Gondoliers."

Quickly Janet Peterson added, "I may try out, too."